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CHANGING WORK DESIGN IN DISASTER RESPONSE: THE POTENTIAL FOR INNOVATION

Work design operates as the system of arrangements and procedures for organizing work to achieve organizational goals (Sinha & Van de Ven, 2005). These systems are commonly established in periods of environmental and organizational stability (Allcorn, 2003) and formulated to achieve efficiencies in resources, employee and team configuration (Hagemann, Kluge, & Ritzmann, 2012; Wright & McMahan, 1992). However, organizations charged with responding to disasters need to be prepared to respond to unexpected events on a large scale, and disaster response planning needs to accommodate a broad range of possible disasters (Donahue & O'Keefe, 2007). When the disaster state occurs, enactment of the specific organizational response is devolved to group or individual level managers. While this enactment presents a range of risks, it also provides a potential avenue for innovation. Employees ultimately are the foundation of change and innovation, as it is people who develop, respond, change and implement new ideas (Jiang, 2012). This paper will explore and analyze motivational characteristics of work design at Australian Red Cross (Queensland) (ARCQ) encompassing normal operations and periods of disaster activation. The study will identify the paradox of dual work designs and the implications for organizational innovation.

Work design encompasses motivational, social and work context characteristics (Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Humphrey, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2007). In practice, these are formally articulated in position descriptions, human resource management (HRM) and communication policy and include the attributes of the task, job, and the social and organizational environment (Humphrey, et al., 2007). Motivational characteristics include autonomy in work scheduling, methods and decision making, variety in skill and task,

significance, task identity and feedback; information processing, job complexity and specialization; and problem solving (Humphrey, et al., 2007). Social characteristics include interdependence, feedback from others, social support and interaction outside the organization (Humphrey, et al., 2007). Work context characteristics include physical demands, work conditions and ergonomics (Humphrey, et al., 2007).

Disaster response organizations like Red Cross and emergency services, operate in two distinct modes - the known and the unknown state. The first responds to daily operations to deliver core services. The second system assists the organization to rapidly configure an organizational and human resource response when a disaster or crisis occurs. Crises act to "purge system elements that are outdated and inappropriate and create new and unexpected opportunities for development and change, growth, evolution, and renewal " (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003, p. 7). Therefore, during a disaster response, it is anticipated there may be critical shifts in work design thus presenting an opportunity for innovation. The study reported in this symposium focuses on each of the characteristics relating to work design and extent to which crises impact upon these will be explored.

This study explored two different states at Australian Red Cross during non-activation or normal operations, and during activation or disaster response¹. An organizational ethnography was conducted over an 18-month period from January 2008 to June 2009. During this time, 51 depth interviews were conducted with staff in senior management roles, team leaders, and marketing communication staff in the primary site and two contextualising cases at other sites within Red Cross (Johnston, 2011).

¹ When a disaster is declared under *The Disaster Management Act 2003* (the Act), a significant coordinated response by Australian government authorities is activated to help the community recover from the disruption. Activation occurs when they are notified of this status by a delegated authority. Australian Red Cross (ARC) is part of the non legislated support group and has agreed responsibilities to provide personnel and administer first aid during emergencies, for example establishing and operating evacuation centres.

State one - *non activated state*

In relation to the motivational and task aspects of work design during non-activation, a number of critical issues were identified. Even though formal processes and job descriptions existed, there was a level of autonomy in work scheduling experienced by most staff. While strategic plans at a business unit level were developed, staff worked in a reactive manner responding to “top of mind” tasks and employee efforts were generally regarded as lacking structure and focus. This lack of structure appeared to be a reflection of lack of prioritisation rather than planning.

While employee flexibility is well regarded by scholars, senior managers suggested an outcome of this fluid state was a loss of focus, meaning staff resorted to using established methods rather than following standard procedures or plans. Approaches to decision making were seen as largely organic and relationship-based, and problem solving was generally undertaken in consultation with other staff, often to “share responsibility or blame” rather than attempt at any true collaborative approach. During non activation, there was also limited variety in tasks and skills required, and staff appeared resistant to change.

While staff expressed a high level of pride in significance of the Red Cross addressing vulnerability they didn’t feel that the public had any awareness of their role during non-activation and staff expressed frustration that their daily tasks were often not contributing to the core goals of ARC. Employees expressed a sense of optimism towards the next activation when they would have the opportunity to do different and often more engaging work.

The social characteristics during non activation revealed staff working in silo based organizational units with tasks being pushed through hierarchies for approval or processing. Interdependence emerged within silo teams rather across business units or from external sources but was not a strong feature of work design.

State two - activated state

During the activation response, normal roles, tasks and duties of the employees are suspended for the duration of the activation. Staff across the organization had an understanding that during activation, non urgent tasks and work requests will be held over. Staff viewed responding to emergencies as Red Cross's "raison d'être" and there was a sense of energy and engagement not visible during non-activation. The staff were buoyed by contribution of the organization being visible and highly valued, and playing a significant role in contributing to minimizing community consequence of the disaster. During this time tasks were flexible and fluid to meet the specific circumstances of the disaster with a sense of urgency not evident in a non-activation state. However, there were very strict rules and protocols to be followed during this time. Staff appeared to work more autonomously but with a single focus and it appeared more likely that they would take innovative approaches in their work to respond to the situation. They reported a heightened sense of purpose and focus, and across the organization there was a feeling of making a contribution to the core business. It was also the case that staff were drawing on a significantly broader skill set and enjoyed the task variety offered during activation.

In relation to social elements of work design during activation, staff worked collaboratively across units and with external teams to coordinate resources, responses and find efficiencies in responding to local community and organizational demands. Staff also experienced significant changes in work context during activation with many staff being physically relocated off site or shifting offices to accommodate changing line responsibilities. When the response from ARC is no longer required, staff return to their normal work responsibilities. During activation, feedback on the organization's efforts was publically expressed and reported in documents, media articles and expressed individually to staff present

in both disaster sites and also in the office. This was in stark contrast to non activation, when feedback was limited to task related activities and predominately from line managers.

In summary, the two states of Red Cross were not formally documented or distinctly articulated work designs, however staff were aware that the two states existed. It was evident that during activation, staff felt they had direction, focus, and purpose, and in times of non activation, staff operated in a reactionary way, hoping for activation to recapture the focus. Activation in response to a disaster found employees demonstrated increased levels of motivation, organization and identified meaningfulness to their work and shared goals. The findings will be discussed in more depth during the symposium and analyze whether flexibility and autonomy in work design is really the panacea it has been claimed to be and whether a lack of flexibility can be a facilitator of innovation in particular circumstances.

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